DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 347 486 CG 024 486

AUTHOR Gelatt, H. B.
TITLE Positive Uncertainty: A Paradoxical Philosophy of Counseling Whose Time Has Come. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Personnel Services, Ann Arbor, Mich.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-CG-92-20
PUB DATE Dec 92
CONTRACT RI88062011
NOTE 3p.
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC/CAPS, 2108 School of Education, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Change Agents; *Change Strategies; *Counseling Techniques; *Counseling Theories; *Counselor Role
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests; Positive Uncertainty

ABSTRACT

Positive Uncertainty is a flexible, ambidextrous approach to managing change, which encourages the use of both the rational and intuitive mind, and incorporates techniques for both making up one's mind and changing it. Positive Uncertainty, as a new philosophy for counseling, will require a paradigm shift for counselors. It is possible that a new vision of counseling can lead to new counseling strategies and that Positive Uncertainty can be a stimulus for such exploration. (ABL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Personnel Services

2108 School of Education
The University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-1259

ERIC DIGEST

December 1992 EDO-CG-92-20

ED347486

CG024486

Positive Uncertainty
A Paradoxical Philosophy of Counseling Whose Time Has Come

H. B. Gelatt

Introduction—The Time is Now

Counselors are change agents; counseling is the helping profession. Is it time for counseling to change? Can counseling change and still be helpful? This digest says yes and tells how.

Once upon a time the past was known, the future was predictable, and the present was changing slowly. That was then, this is now. Today, the past isn't what we thought it to be, the future is no longer predictable, and the present is changing rapidly. Once upon a time counselors helped clients use a rational process for making decisions, choosing what to be when they "grow up," and preparing for and adjusting to change.

Today, decision making, growing up, and change aren't what they used to be. Decision making is recognized as more than a rational process. What to be when grown up is less important than growing. And change itself has changed so much that our old beliefs, attitudes, and even knowledge are now out of date. To become up to date with what is now, we need to change our philosophy, our theory underlying our thoughts, our point of view. *Positive Uncertainty's* time has come.

Positive Uncertainty is a philosophy, a point of view, a 2 × 4 approach to making decisions about the future when you don't know what it will be. It is a paradoxical, ambiguous process for managing change using both your rational and intuitive mind. And it is a process for changing your mind as you go along—a process for learning while growing up.

In the past, paradox (something contrary to common sense yet perhaps true) was uncommon, and ambiguity (something capable of being understood in two or more possible ways) was unwelcome. Today, paradox is everywhere—as common sense is being revised. And ambiguity is now acceptable—as absolutes are being distrusted. Can counseling develop an approach that is paradoxical and ambiguous and still be helpful? Should it? This digest says yes and tells how—using *Positive Uncertainty* as its basic philosophy.

Why is *Positive Uncertainty* Needed?

Today change is not only more rapid, more complex, more turbulent, and more unpredictable, it has moved into uncharted waters. "White water rapids" is the metaphor used now to describe change. "The more things change, the more they stay the same," is a hopelessly outdated idea.

Change today is called "breakpoint change" (Land and Jarman, 1992). Breakpoint change brings giant leaps and crucial shifts in the rules that govern success. What has been learned is that these changes are natural (as in nature)—even though they cause massive gaps between what has always been and what can happen next. What is needed, these authors say, is to take what has been learned about change over the years and apply that understanding to our lives today.

Counseling should take what has been learned about change and help people apply that understanding to their daily lives—help people change their way of thinking and alter their future visions. By challenging conventional wisdom and by using natural, intuitive, and new kinds of thinking, counselors can help clients find new and surprising answers to seemingly complex and apparently "uncharted" problems.

Business organizations today face the dilemma of finding a balance between managing current and short-term work and managing the profound changes required to ensure a positive future (Beckhard & Pritchard, 1992). Counselors, today, face the same dilemma, finding a balance between helping clients skillfully cope with immediate, short-range problems and creatively managing the profound changes in thinking often required to visualize and cause a positive personal future.

Changing our minds will be the most important change in the future, and the hardest. Counselors should lead the way. *Positive Uncertainty*, a flexible, ambidextrous approach to managing change, encourages the use of both the rational and intuitive mind, and incorporates techniques for both making up one's mind and changing it.

What is *Positive Uncertainty?*

The following is a brief summary from Gelatt, 1991:

Two Attitudes

1. Accept the past, present, and future as uncertain.
2. Be positive about the uncertainty.

Four Factors

1. What you want
2. What you know
3. What you believe
4. What you do

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Positive Uncertainty uses these attitudes and factors to provide flexibility and balance. It does so by combining the traditional, linear, rational, left-brain approach with the creative, nonlinear, intuitive, right-brain approach into an ambiguous, paradoxical set of principles for planning and deciding.

Traditional decision-making strategies say that when deciding:

- Be focused by setting clear goals
- Be aware by collecting relevant facts
- Be objective by predicting probable outcomes
- Be practical by choosing actions rationally

Positive Uncertainty suggests four creative, but paradoxical, variations on these traditional, rational procedures as modern, balanced principles:

- Be focused and flexible
- Be aware and wary
- Be objective and optimistic
- Be practical and magical

These variations are derived from the four factors and the two attitudes. They will become the four basic paradoxical principles of *Positive Uncertainty*.

Positive Uncertainty's Paradoxical, Ambiguous Principles

1. **Be focused and flexible about what you want.**
   - Know what you want but don't be sure
   - Treat goals as hypotheses
   - Balance achieving goals with discovering them
2. **Be aware and wary about what you know.**
   - Recognize that knowledge is power and ignorance is bliss
   - Treat memory as an enemy
   - Balance using information with imagination
3. **Be objective and optimistic about what you believe.**
   - Notice that reality is in the "eye" and the "I" of the beholder
   - Treat beliefs as prophecy
   - Balance reality testing with wishful thinking
4. **Be practical and magical about what you do.**
   - Learn to plan and plan to learn
   - Treat intuition as real
   - Balance responding to change and causing change

How Can Counseling Use *Positive Uncertainty?*

Positive Uncertainty, as a new philosophy for counseling, will require a paradigm shift for counselors. A paradigm shift is an "Aha" experience when someone sees the composite picture in another way (Covey, 1990). The old paradigm was one of "separation"; the new paradigm is one of "seamlessness." It is "The Paradigm of the Whole" (Ferguson, 1991). This paradigm of the whole emphasizes interconnectedness, and therefore, requires systems thinking. Systems thinking is what Senge (1990) calls "The Fifth Discipline."

So what's so new about this for counseling? Counselors have always known about connectedness: mind and body, facts and feelings, believing and seeing, etc. This new proposed philosophy, involving *Positive Uncertainty*, the paradigm of the whole, and systems thinking, would refocus counseling's approach to change:

> If we want to make relative minor changes in our lives, we can perhaps appropriately focus on our attitudes and behaviors. But if we want to make significant, quantum change, we need to work on our basic paradigms. (Covey, 1990)

Conclusion

If counseling worked on counseling's basic paradigm, and if counselors worked on clients' basic paradigms, some "breakpoint changes" might emerge (see Gelatt, 1992). Most of the readings used for this digest, listed in the reference section, are from the noncounseling literature. Looking outside of our field may lead to new insights, even new visions. It is possible that a new vision of counseling can lead to new counseling strategies and that *Positive Uncertainty* can be a stimulus for such exploration.

References

Beckhard, R., & Pritchard, W. (1992). *Changing the essence*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Covey, S. (1989). *The 7 habits of highly effective people*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Ferguson, M. (1991). Paradigm shift from separation to seamlessness. *New Sense Bulletin, 17*, 4.

Gelatt, H. B. (1989). Positive uncertainty: A new decision making framework for counseling. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 36*, 252–256.

Gelatt, H. B. (1991). *Creative decision making using positive uncertainty*. Los Altos, CA: Crisp Publishing.

Gelatt, H. B. (1992). A new vision for counseling. *Counseling and Human Development, 25*(1).

Handy, C. (1989). *The age of unreason*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Land, G., & Jarman, B. (1992). *Breakpoint and beyond*. New York: Harper Business.

Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline*. New York: Doubleday.

H. B. Gelatt, Ed.D., is a licensed psychologist with the State of California. He is a nationally known author, trainer, consultant, and keynote speaker.

ERIC Digests are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced.

ERIC

Educational Resources Information Center

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education under contract number RI88062011. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.